

Victorian Electoral Commission

Submission to the Inquiry Into the Delivery of Electoral Education

Terms of Reference:

1. Electoral education services provided to schools, students and teachers

The Victorian Electoral Commission's Passport to Democracy Program

Since 2008, the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) has been delivering its Passport to Democracy (PtD) Program in secondary schools. PtD is a free and fully resourced civics and citizenship program for secondary students (Year 9, 10 and VCAL), through which students explore and take action on community-based issues. The aim of the program is to assist students to make the connection between issues they are interested in and politics, and increase students' active citizenship skills to the point where they feel confident and equipped to take action on any issues of concern to them.

The program is predominantly delivered by teachers, whilst the VEC provides 'ready to teach' resources. Resources include a full course with lesson plans and student activities, which are all available online. The lesson plans are mapped across the Australian Curriculum: Civics and Citizenship in Year 8, AusVELS in Year 5–10, and Victorian Applied Learning curriculum. Teachers access the online lesson plans by providing their contact details, whilst students can access activities without logging in. The online resources are being used in Victoria and have been accessed by teachers from New South Wales and Queensland.

A core component of the program is the running of a mock election, during which students form political parties around their issue. In the party's election speeches students are asked to explain why their issue is important and what actions have they taken to ensure their voice is heard. The election class resources, such as a voting booth and ballot box, are provided to schools free of charge in order to create an authentic experience for students. Teachers order these through an online booking form. Teachers have the option of delivering the mock election lesson themselves or requesting the in-class support of the VEC's Education Officer.

In an outreach session, the VEC's Education Officer (a trained secondary high school teacher) explains the mechanics of an election by allocating students into the roles of election officials. The preferential voting count is explained through a physical count of the ballot papers, whereby each student becomes a ballot paper. This aim is to physically demonstrate the methodology of allocating preferences.

The VEC also offers 30 minute presentations to students in their last year of high school. These sessions provide information on the relevance of politics to the students, how they can enrol to vote or even experience democracy in action by working at an election.

This year, the VEC supported the Victorian Student Representative Council's regional and metropolitan conferences. During these conferences the VEC conducted 12 teacher professional development sessions on enabling student voice in schools through student representatives. The VEC has participated in these conferences as it believes that it is important for students to not only learn about democracy in their Civics and Citizenship classes, but to experience it in their schools.

Professional development for teachers

One of the key learnings of the VEC over the past decade is that many teachers avoid taking on civics and citizenship classes as they are not confident with their own knowledge in this area.

As part of the Passport to Democracy Program, the VEC offers tailored professional development (PD) sessions for teachers. The PD session can focus either on the fundamental concepts in and delivery of the PTD program, or delivery of a mock election.

In the past twelve months, the VEC has held workshops at teacher conferences with regard to the concept of active citizenship and Passport to Democracy Program more generally e.g. the 2014 Victorian Applied Learning Association Conference.

The VEC has also conducted Passport to Democracy PD days for teachers in both metropolitan and regional areas, which have been well attended. These sessions focussed on discussion of civics and citizenship teaching, and how teachers can facilitate learning about the democratic process in schools.

How could electoral education be improved?

Electoral education would benefit from having a more prominent place in school curriculums; while currently it is an elective, consideration could be given to making it mandatory. It needs to be taught in such a way that students understand that the process of government is integral to everything they do, that it is important to have a say on issues in their community, and that their opinion and vote counts. This can be assisted by providing students with opportunities through which they can learn about the impact of politics on their lives. An active citizenship approach provides not only the theory, but opportunities for practical experience.

There also needs to be recognition that it is not just the role of Australian electoral commissions to increase awareness of the importance of living in a democracy, enrolling and voting. There is a critical role and responsibility on the part of all stakeholders in the political process.

2. Evolving technology and new platforms for delivering electoral education

With the ever accelerating pace of technology and its rapid uptake on the part of the Australian public, those electoral commissions delivering electoral education must engage with and utilise current technologies for the delivery of electoral education. There should be a greater emphasis on online and interactive resources, which aim to develop creative and critical thinking skills in Australia's young people. The ability to keep pace with technology and the latest in teaching methodologies is a mandatory requirement for any electoral commission wanting to have an impact in the area of education. Young people in particular are immersed in technology – often before they fully develop their speech. To capture their attention and excite their imagination, there is a need to understand e-learning platforms, as well as the language and instant, visual interaction styles of these digital natives. In the absence of this understanding, electoral commissions may miss opportunities to make meaningful and lasting connections with young people through electoral education programs.

This submission to the Inquiry into Electoral education has been prepared by:

Danijela Spoljaric
Education Team Leader
Victorian Electoral Commission
Level 11, 530 Collins Street, Melbourne VIC 3000